The University of Central Florida's Mobile App

How UCF Continually Innovates to Best Serve Its Community Across and Beyond Campus

When the University of Central Florida (UCF) realized its existing mobile app was not meeting the needs of digital-first students, it found its solution in Modo. With the modern and robust Modo app building platform, the school is empowered to better engage, communicate with, and support the UCF community.

"*UCF Mobile is a true companion app for our students, providing them easy access to the information and resources they need every day.*"

Ryan Seilhamer, Assistant Director of Mobile Strategy & Innovation, University of Central Florida

Established in 1963, UCF serves over 70,000 students across a large, centralized campus. In addition, it offers over 200 majors in three other locations. Like most universities, UCF wants to offer its community quick access to services, resources, content, and communication.

Key Metrics

- 350,000 downloads
- ~85 million screen views
- 25 million sessions
- 700,000 uses of COVID self-checker
- Adoption rates: 90% freshman and 83% undergrad

Reimagining the Mobile App with Modo Campus®

In 2010, UCF's CIO tasked the school's central IT department with launching a campus app, which it did in 2011 using a product from Blackboard. Due to burdensome management requirements and difficulty quickly implementing new features, the app languished until 2015 when Ryan Seilhamer, Assistant Director of Mobile Strategy & Innovation for UCF, took ownership.
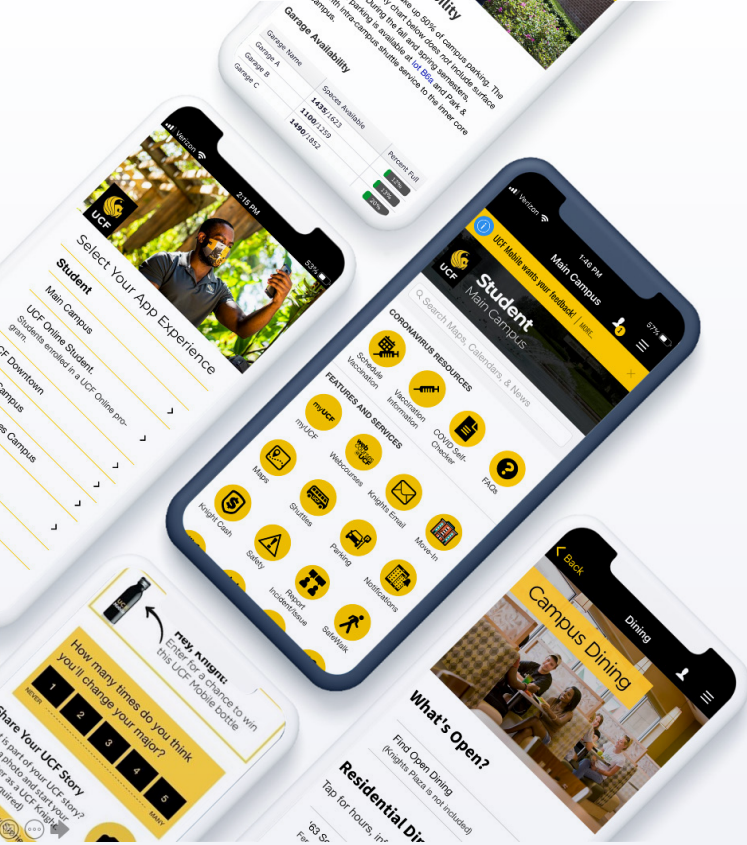
"For a university of this size, the goal is to aggregate all possible resources to create the best mobile experience possible for students," Seilhamer explains.

After evaluating UCF's options, Ryan chose Modo Campus and went live with a Modo-powered app in 2016. "I saw that this mobile platform would help us innovate and quickly iterate to better serve student needs," he continues.

Personalizing the Campus Experience

Since nearly 100% of UCF students own smartphones, mobile was the clear option and a worthwhile investment for UCF. "We like that this app-building platform is easy to use, includes pre-configured modules tailored to the education sector, supports integration with various data sources and websites, and is backed by great service and support. In fact, that's what enabled us to get up and running quickly," explains Ryan.

To best serve all constituents, Seilhamer and his team initially built seven different experiences based on unique personas. They also took advantage of many out-of-the-box tools, such as screen layout templates and sticker packs, to express the UCF brand and inject its culture into the app. Combined, these enable UCF to personalize the overall app, its content, and the communication it delivers. Students, alumni, faculty, staff, and parents simply log in for an experience that's most relevant to them.

Delivering Unique Experiences

Today the app supports 11 unique experiences, including ones tailored for students on the main campus, the Rosen School of Hospitality Management, and UCF Downtown. The Health Services campus and UCF Online students also enjoy a customized experience. The 12,000 faculty and staff are served a single universal experience, while alumni, prospective students, and guests can also self-select to access relevant information and resources.

UCF harnesses numerous features in Modo Campus to customize the app for each location. This includes direct links to email, native maps, parking availability, real-time shuttle tracking, news, safety, dining and more. Integrations with campus amenities, such as transit, room booking, and wayfinding help optimize the overall campus experience.

According to Seilhamer, "A mobile application is different from almost any other campus service or resource. You can use it to mobilize the student experience with your LMS portal, transportation, dining, safety, and other essential campus resources."

Adding a COVID Self-Checker

Once COVID hit, the school relied even more on the mobile app for communication with students. It quickly updated the app to feature COVID info and news and to promote a vaccination campaign.

According to Seilhamer, "While our previous app was a single experience, we can easily build and deliver unique, relevant experiences with Modo. We spent two years working with all our campuses to understand needs and personalize the experience. This paid off during COVID because our app made it easier to communicate with and support students, faculty and staff."

In partnership with the university's IT team, Seilhamer's team launched a COVID self-checker on the app. Students, staff and faculty can assess themselves for COVID symptoms. The form asks if they have any symptoms, if they have traveled anywhere with high rates of transmission, or been in contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID. If students answer "yes" to one of the questions, the app directs them to the campus health center to get a COVID test. If staff and faculty fail the screening, the app notifies their supervisor, who can direct the employee to an on- or off-campus COVID test site.
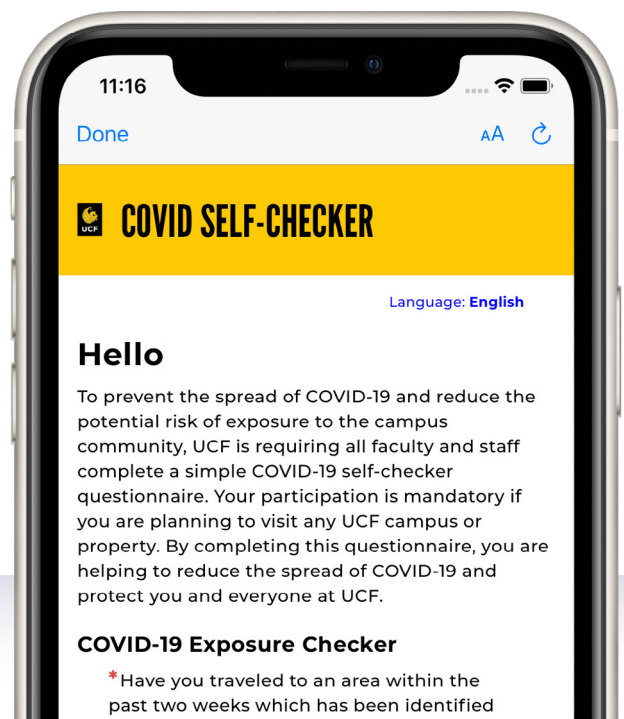
"We want students, staff and faculty to do the assessment before coming to campus but without visiting a website, which is why we provided this self-checker on our mobile app. So far, it's been filled out 700,000 times," says Seilhamer.

Driving App Adoption Via Virtual NSO

Even before the pandemic, UCF had the foresight to embed the NSO experience in its app. All UCF students and their parents are required to download the app and use it during orientation. Available since 2018, virtual NSO has seen great adoption and drives continued usage of UCF Mobile.

By making its mobile app the first touch point during orientation, UCF drives students and their families to get familiar with it. In turn, the school can easily communicate with students and their families beyond orientation.

"The impact of mobile NSO is significant, as incoming freshman and transfer students are the biggest catalyst for the adoption of our mobile app. Because the virtual NSO experience immerses them in the app, they come to rely on it for everyday needs, like campus maps, dining, shuttles, and more. For example, the app has been used to support over 70 events within five years," explains Seilhamer.
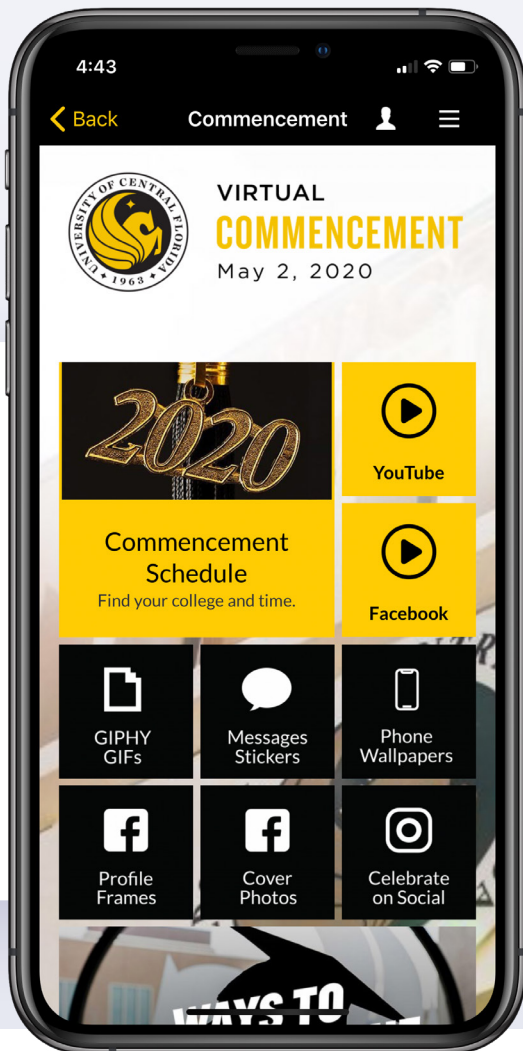
Going Virtual with Commencement

UCF's Commencement is a big event with 13 colleges for over 17,000 student degrees every year. In 2020, UCF transitioned to a virtual format instead of the typical face-to-face event and leaned heavily on UCF Mobile to support the commencement experience. UCF Mobile partnered with UCF Marketing to stream the ceremony and offer photo galleries, iMessage sticker packs, animated GIFs, Instagram filters, phone wallpapers and more.

Delivering a True Student Companion App

Seilhamer and his team have innovated in other ways. One example is through a partnership with LiveSafe that enabled UCF to integrate LiveSafe's product directly into the UCF Mobile app.

UCF can geofence locations and a safe walk using this product, and allow students to submit emergency and non-emergency tips to the police department and have a two-way chat directly via the UCF Mobile application. UCF also supports a digital identity card within the app.

He's quick to underscore the importance of collaborating with peers in other departments to deliver an ever-evolving app that meets needs across the university. These include those responsible for the First Year Experience, the Office of Student Involvement, Marketing, IT, Digital Learning, Transportation Services and UCF Pride.
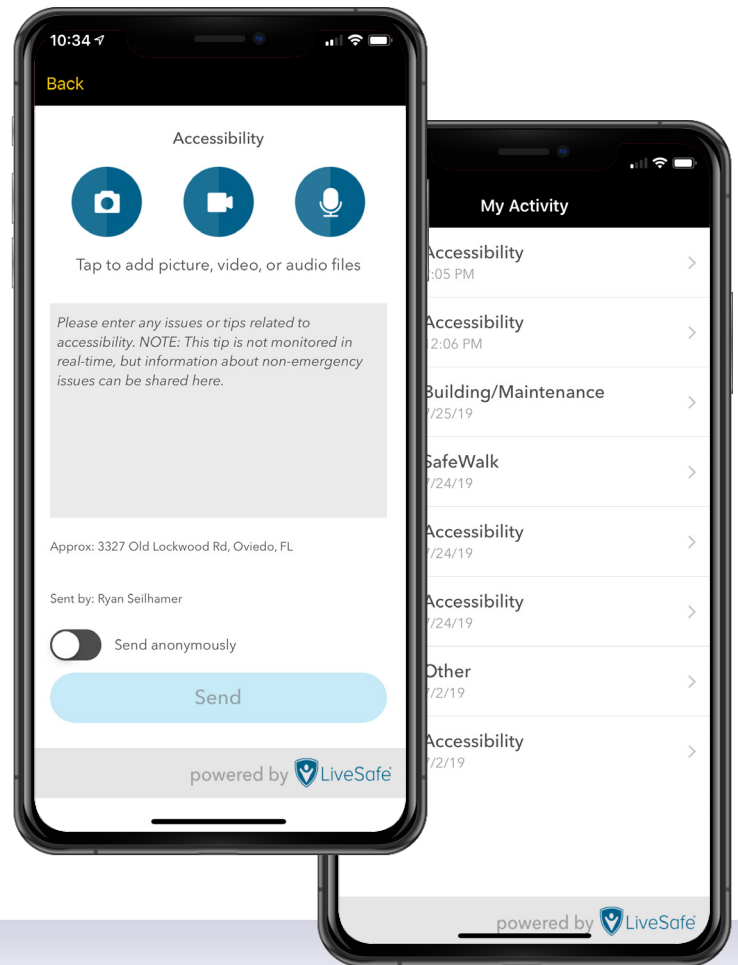
Communication That Drives Success

With push notifications, UCF can send the right information to the right audience at the right time. This enables the university to drive desired outcomes in a smart, timely way. For instance, the UCF Summerize campus initiative in the app encourages students to register for online classes before they leave for the summer, helping keep them engaged and ensuring they succeed.

UCF can also send emergency notifications and safety warnings via its app. Students can also opt-in to be notified of shuttle issues that disrupt the transportation schedule, and subscribe to alerts from Knights Pantry, which distributes food and clothing to students in need.

High Adoption Rates and a

Better Student Experience

UCF Mobile boasts extraordinarily high user adoption rates, with the majority of UCF students – 90% of freshmen and 83% of undergrads – using the app regularly. In fact, the app has been downloaded 350,000 times and served approximately 85 million page views across 25 million sessions.

"This allows us to keep students informed and engaged with relevant student-life information and empowered to maximize their campus experience. Simply put, it makes them feel part of the community from day one," explains Seilhamer.
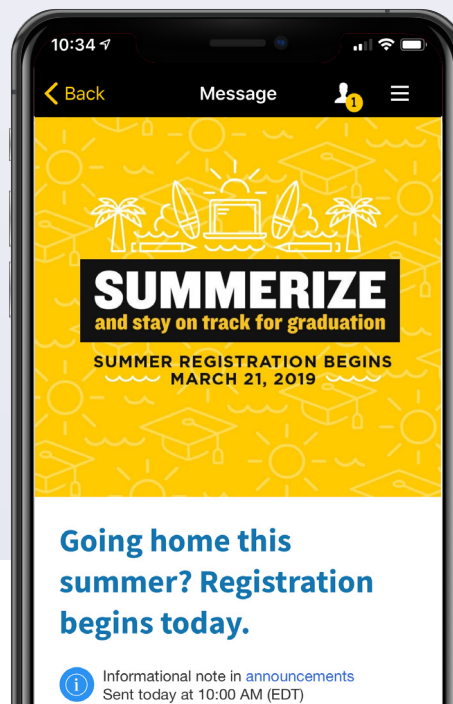
UCF MOBILE UNIVERSITY PARTNERS: At UCF, app content and services are distributed. The app itself is managed by Mobile Strategy & Innovation (MSI) but over 40 UCF departments and entities contribute to the app.

- First Year Experience
- SGA
- OSI
- Marketing
- Career Services
- Academic Advising
- SDES
- Faculty Center for Teaching & Learning
- Center for Distributed Learning

- Athletics
- Registrars Office
- Leadership Impact Program
- UCF PD
- UCF Emergency Management
- Housing
- Technology Product Center
- Sustainability

- Pegasus Innovation Lab
- Arts at UCF
- UCF Dining Services
- UCF Business Services
- SARC
- College of Graduate Studies
- Parking Services
- Shuttle Services
- UCF IT
- UCF Health

- UCF Pride
- Counseling and Psychological Services
- Student Health Services
- UCF Downtown
- Rosen College of Hospitality Management
- College of Medicine
- College of Undergraduate Studies
- Faculty Excellence

Mobile: A Sustainable Choice

In 2019, UCF Mobile was recognized at the annual Appademy Awards as providing the best overall campus experience, and in 2021 for the best commencement app. The app has also helped reduce costs for the university.

The university's transportation services department, for example, was assessing a service to send text messages notifying students of shuttle issues. The department expected to use the service 10 times per semester at a significant cost. Instead, the app enables this notification for thousands of students at no cost in the UCF Mobile app.

Additionally, introducing a mobile NSO event has enabled UCF to make student handbooks and other orientation materials available directly from the app. This eliminated the need to print materials for some 20,000 students—at an annual savings of about $10,000.

"We are resource tight and couldn't have built, launched, and maintained a mobile campus app without a platform like Modo's," says Seilhamer.

Looking to the Future

In light of the success of the COVID self-checker, Seilhamer believes UCF might add more health-related information and self-checkers to the app. "We could add self-checkers for the flu and other common ailments as a way to help keep our community safe," he explains.

Other new features on the roadmap include a better way for the community to report issues or incidents that happen on campus, and support for additional personas like international students. Seilhamer also wants to enable students to quickly see key data such as their academic standing and financial aid status.

Moreover, he envisions ways the app can further help students succeed, such as by identifying students at risk through integration with other key systems (e.g., SIS and financial aid). "I anticipate using machine learning and predictive capabilities to guide students on steps they need to take to be successful in their UCF journey," he continues.

"Modo is a good partner offering a robust mobile campus app platform and the support we need to continue innovating and best serving our community," Seilhamer concludes.